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Assemblage Theory and Schizoanalysis

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Inspired by Deleuze and Guattari, assemblage theory, as it has come to be known in recent years (largely due to the efforts of Actor Network Theory rather than Deleuzians, I might add), is steadily gathering a significant following in the social sciences. There can be no question that it has generated interesting and important new ways of thinking about the complex nature of social reality (again, largely due to the efforts of Actor Network Theory). But it has also drifted a long way from its origins and in doing so a number of both small and large misprisions of Deleuze and Guattari's work have slipped under the radar and embedded themselves as 'truths'. This is particularly true of the DeLanda-led version of assemblage theory, but he is far from being the only 'guilty' party in this regard. I have never been one to think that there is no such thing as a 'right' or a 'wrong' reading, so I'm going to simply go ahead and say assemblage theory makes two kinds of error in their appropriation of Deleuze and Guattari: (1) it focuses on the complex and undecidable (Actor Network Theory); and/or (2) it focuses on the problem of emergence (DeLanda). It may be that these are providential errors because they give rise to new and interesting ways of thinking in their own right, though I have my doubts on that front, but they nevertheless cloud our understanding of our Deleuze and Guattari and in that regard call for our critical attention.

Assemblage is now so widely used as a term it is generally forgotten that in spite of its Francophone appearance, it is actually an English word. Assemblage is Brian Massumi's translation of *agencement* which, as John Law has noted, encompasses a range of meanings that include "to arrange, to dispose, to fit up, to combine, to order".[1] It could therefore just as appropriately be translated as arrangement, in the sense of a 'working arrangement', provided it was kept clear that it described an ongoing process rather than a static situation. It could also be thought in terms of a 'musical arrangement', which is a way of adapting an abstract plan of music to a particular performer and performance. Arrangement is in many ways my preferred translation for these reasons. This is not to say I dis-

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[1] J. Law, *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research*, London 2004, s. 41.

agree with Massumi's choice, which like all translations has its problems but is very far from being wrong or inappropriate. It is considerably better than several other choices that have also been tried. For example, Gary Genosko translates *agencement* as 'layout', which is too static in my view. It implies something much flatter and more fixed than an arrangement, which can at least imply a temporal as well as spatial aspect. Similarly, the use of the word 'ensemble' is also problematic because it lacks the contingency of arrangement, which can always fail. Assemblage is problematic for these reasons too, though less so, which is why I ultimately favour arrangement.

It is worth adding that *agencement* is Deleuze and Guattari's own translation, or perhaps re-arrangement would be a better word, of the German word *Komplex* (as in the 'Oedipal complex' or the 'castration complex'). Despite the fact it is Guattari himself who defines the assemblage this way in the various glossaries he has provided, the connection between Freud's complex and the concept of the assemblage has been almost completely ignored. This may go some way toward explaining the origin of the two kinds of errors I will discuss in what follows – it appears to me that the term assemblage has been taken at face value, as though the concept was somehow self-explanatory. It would be interesting to know why Massumi chose that particular word. My guess – and I emphasise that it is purely a guess – is that he was thinking of the famous MOMA exhibition curated by William C. Seitz, the *Art of the Assemblage* (1961), which featured several artists central to Deleuze and Guattari's work.[2] If so, it was an inspired choice, but one that still needs to be triangulated, if you will, by factoring in Guattari's strange comments on this type of assemblage art in his essay *Balancing-Sheet Program for Desiring Machines* which was appended to the second edition of *Anti-Oedipus* so as not to succumb to the objective fallacy (as Deleuze calls it) of treating assemblage as already understood.

Referring to Man Ray's collage 'dancer/danger', Guattari observes that what is crucial about this piece of sculpture is the fact that it doesn't work. He means this quite literally: its working parts, its cogs and wheels and so on, do not turn or intermesh with one another in a mechanical fashion. It is precisely for that reason, he argues, that it *works* as a piece of art.[3] It works by creating an association (i.e., refrain) between the human dancer and the inhuman machine and thereby brings them into a new kind of relation which Deleuze and Guattari would later call the assemblage, but in their first works they called the desiring-machine. Desiring-machines are the working parts of the machinic unconscious; it is their operation that the pragmatics of schizoanalysis is tasked to understand. The only time they make a direct comparison between the unconscious and actual machines is when they compare it to the absurd machines of the Dadaists, surrealists, as well as the

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[2] See: W. Seitz, *The Art of the Assemblage*, New York 1961.

[3] F. Guattari, *Balancing-Sheet Program for Desiring Machines*, [w] idem, *Chaosophy*, trans. R. Hurley, New York 1995, s. 120.

infernal machines imagined by Buster Keaton and Rube Goldberg.[4] And again, what is crucial is that these machines don't work. In other words, the obvious mechanical explanation of various machines is precisely not what Deleuze and Guattari had in mind when they conceived of the concept of the assemblage and its forerunner the desiring-machine.

Yet this is precisely how assemblage tends to be treated. For that reason, let me quickly return to Freud to try to re-orient thinking about the assemblage. According to Laplanche and Pontalis there are three senses of the word complex in Freud's writing: (1) "a relatively stable arrangement of chains of association"; (2) "a collection of personal characteristics – including the best integrated ones – which is organised to a greater or lesser degree, the emphasis here being on emotional reactions"; (3) "a basic structure of interpersonal relationships and the way in which the individual finds and appropriates his place". Laplanche and Pontalis also note that there is an underlying tendency toward 'psychologism' inherent in the term. Not only does it imply that all individual behaviour is shaped by a latent, unchanging structure, it also allows that there is a complex for every conceivable psychological type.[5] The key point I want to make here is that none of these ways of thinking about the complex actually requires that we give any consideration to a material object. This isn't to say material objects cannot form part of an assemblage because clearly they can, and Deleuze and Guattari give several examples of this, but it is to say the assemblage is not defined by such objects and as Bettelheim's case history of 'little Joey' demonstrates can function perfectly well without them.[6]

One of the great insights of that it shows that material objects can and frequently do have agential power. This idea is far from being incompatible with Deleuze and Guattari's thinking, but one should be wary of making it the central point of analysis as ANT does. This isn't to say that the search for non-human actors isn't an important project, but it is to say that it misses what is central to assemblage: it should be seen as a solution rather than a cause. One might say this is the nub of what ANT gets wrong with respect to the assemblage, but the problems run deeper than that because ANT use the assemblage to name a complex form of causality which it might be useful to think of as distributed or distributive because of the way it rejects both direct and indirect causality in favour of a third option which attributes causality to the whole network of interacting elements. To take an illustrative case in point, John Law uses assemblage to deal with complex social and cultural situations or problematics which can neither be reduced to a single instance, object or truth nor allowed to remain indefinite,

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[4]   Ibidem, s. 135. This essay originally appeared as the appendix to the second edition of *Anti-Oedipus*. In the text Guattari actually refers to Julius Goldberg, but from the discussion that follows it is clear he meant Rube Goldberg.

[5]   J. Laplanche, J-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith, London 1973, s. 72-74.

[6]   See my discussion: I. Buchanan, *Little Hans Assemblage*, "Visual Arts Research" vol. 39 (1) 2013, s. 9-17. As Bettelheim notes, little Joey's machines function regardless of whether or not he had props.

undecidable or purely perspectival as though to say (*pace* Derrida) that there is no discernible object, instance or truth.

Law's 'gold standard' test case, if you will, is the Ladbroke Grove train crash in 1999, which killed 23 people and injured 414 others.[7] As he notes, a single or definitive explanation of the cause of the accident is impossible, not only because both the drivers involved died in the crash. There were simply too many factors that could have been the cause for any single factor to blame, ranging from driver error to machine or system failure. Yet given the need to learn from it and thereby prevent a recurrence of this type of tragedy forensic analysis needed to produce something more solid than an open-ended 'anything is possible' finding. As Law explains, there are in effect two kinds of problem here – the first can be solved rather easily, instead of a single answer, we can offer multiple answers, or rather multiple explanations, and this is precisely what the inquest did. But this raises a second and much trickier problem because multiple explanations tend to give rise to the perception of indefiniteness, thus making the findings seem more not less credible for being multiple, even though in point of fact the explanation is more likely to be multiple than single. Deleuze and Guattari's solution, which Law partially adopts, is to 'trouble' the distinction between single and multiple.

> [T]he absence of singularity does not imply that we live in a world composed of an indefinite number of disconnected bodies […] It does not imply that reality is fragmented. It instead implies something much more complex. It implies that different realities overlap and interfere with one another. Their relations, partially coordinated, are complex and messy.[8]

Deleuze and Guattari's solution is in fact more radical than Law's – where he is only prepared to trouble the distinction single and multiple, they reject it altogether. By postulating multiple, overlapping realities, Law cannot escape the charges of pluralism, perspectivalism, and relativism that he hopes to escape by exactly this means. The train drivers didn't have a separate reality from each other, nor did they have a separate reality from the signal switch that may or may not have failed, and so on. Similarly Deleuze and Guattari insist that there is no such thing as 'psychic' reality, which would somehow be different from other kinds of reality.[9] There is only one reality, but that reality is multiple in and of itself and we need conceptual tools like Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the assemblage to disentangle it and render visible its constitutive threads. If we stay with Law's train crash example, we can say that the drivers perhaps saw things differently from each other – they were travelling in different directions with different destinations – but that very difference in perception is constitutive

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[7] J. Law, op. cit., s. 93.

[8] Ibidem, s. 61.

[9] Schizophrenics may apprehend the world differently from other people, but that does not mean that their interaction with the world isn't real or that their grasp of the world lacks reality (a standard definition of psychosis is that it constitutes a loss of reality). We do not slip from one reality to another.

of the reality they shared. The signal system was part of that reality, as was the whole rail network, and behind that the whole hinterland (as Law usefully calls it) of the drivers' training, the design and manufacture of the trains, and so on.

To describe the crash fully, then, one has to follow the multi-various lines that twist and turn and finally intersect to produce the event we know as the Ladbroke Grove train disaster. To give this a more human scale, one might think of the countless mini-decisions, chances and coincidences that led to those 23 people being on those trains at that particular time. Had any one of them missed their train that day they might have cursed their luck, until they discovered that chance had saved their life. But these decisions are essentially random – they are only held together by the event itself. Had the trains not collided, these people would not have died in this way, and their lives would not have intersected in this way either. My point is that while it is an undoubtedly complex event, with a great many elements, there is no particular analytic advantage in describing it as an assemblage. It lacks the necessity of the 'true' assemblage – it is an accident, not an arrangement. There is nothing deliberate about it, therefore, strictly speaking, it isn't an assemblage.

As Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of 'little Hans' makes clear, the assemblage is a 'living' arrangement. Hans' agoraphobia is an arrangement he has with his anxieties, his neuroses, it is as much an attempt at self-cure (as Freud might put it) as it is a symptom. Whatever it is that underpins his anxiety, whether it is oedipally motivated or not, it is nonetheless assuaged by putting in place an arrangement that inhibits the degree to which he has to confront that anxiety. By limiting his encounter with 'the street' he limits his anxiety. This is how the assemblage works. It always benefits someone or something outside of the assemblage itself (the body without organs); along the same lines, the assemblage is purposeful, it is not simply a happenstance collocation of people, materials and actions, but the deliberate realisation of a distinctive plan (abstract machine); lastly, the assemblage is a multiplicity, which means its components are both known and integral to its existence, not unknown and undecided. Law's version of the assemblage is not the same as Deleuze and Guattari's – this doesn't mean that the way he uses it is problematic in and of itself. As can be seen in the example given above, it is used to map out a very particular type of problem in the social sciences, one that is encountered in a great many situations, as is evident from the vast and rapidly growing body of work generated by ANT theorists.

The same cannot be said for the second error – it reduces assemblage to the status of adjective. The central exhibit here is Manuel DeLanda's *A New Philosophy of Society*. As I will briefly explain, it typifies a general problem in the reception of the concept of the assemblage. Aligned with Deleuze (and quite pointedly *not* Guattari), it tactfully or perhaps tactically positions itself as 'Deleuze 2.0', and instructs us to feel free to ignore its connection to Deleuze altogether. Doubtless this is because conceptually it owes very little to Deleuze. As

even a casual inspection can confirm Braudel, Goffman, and Weber, among others, are much more central to DeLanda's formulation of the assemblage than Deleuze. The problem here isn't simply that something that isn't Deleuzian is presented as Deleuzian, it runs much deeper than that. The real problem is that 'Deleuze 2.0' is conceptually stunted in comparison with the 'original'. DeLanda 'improves' on Deleuze and Guattari by reformulating their concept in such a way that it lacks all analytic power.

DeLanda treats the assemblage as an aggregate, albeit a complex aggregate of the variety of an ecosystem. Nonetheless, for DeLanda the assemblage is an entity that grows in both scale and complexity as components are added. In his view, assemblages are "wholes whose properties emerge from the interactions between parts". He suggests they can be used to "model" "entities" such "interpersonal networks", "social justice movements", "cities", and "nation-states".[10] Central to DeLanda's thinking about assemblages is Deleuze's idea (drawn from Hume) that relations are exterior to their terms. This enables DeLanda to offer an account of assemblages as ontologically "unique, singular, historically contingent, [and] individual."[11] More particularly, though, DeLanda frames the assemblage as a new way of thinking about part-whole relations, essentially pitching it as a new kind of causality, one that acts without conscious intention or purpose.

> For example, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe the authority structure of many organisations changed from a form based on traditional legitimacy to one based on rational-legal bureaucratic procedures. The change affected not only government bureaucracies, but also hospitals, school and prisons. When studied in detail, however, no deliberate plan can be discerned, the change occurring through the slow replacement over two centuries of one set of daily routines by another. Although this replacement did involve decisions by individual persons […] the details of these decisions are in most cases causally redundant to explain the outcome […].[12]

There are a number of problems here, but I will focus on just three 'fatal flaws' in DeLanda's account: first, the assemblage does not constitute a part-whole relation; second, the assemblage is not the product of an accumulation of individual acts; and third, the assemblage does not change incrementally. To say that a bureaucratic structure of authority was constituted by and ultimately transformed by myriad individual acts says nothing but the obvious. One does not even need a concept to make this claim. This is history in the mode of one damn thing after another (as Arnold Toynbee famously put it). Focusing on the 'how' question as insistently as he does obscures the deeper and more interesting 'what' question. Worrying about *how* a particular authority structure actually

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[10] M. DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*, London 2006, s. 5-6.

[11] Ibidem, s. 40.

[12] Ibidem, s. 41.

changes forgets that the real question here, at least insofar as assemblage theory is concerned, is *what* is that structure of authority? How is it constituted?

Let me turn briefly to Deleuze and Guattari's account of the formation of the state in *Anti-Oedipus*. As will be immediately obvious, it follows a path that is diametrically opposite to the one mapped out by DeLanda. "The State was not formed in progressive stages; it appears fully armed, a master stroke executed all at once; the primordial *Urstaat*, the eternal model of everything the State wants to be and desires."[13] History is *in* the *Urstaat*, in its head, not the other way round: primitive society knew about the terrors of the state, Deleuze and Guattari argue (following Pierre Clastres), long before any actual states existed. Their rituals and customs, centred on the destruction of accumulated 'wealth' (i.e., seeds, weapons, furs and so on) so as to institute a socially binding debt-relation within the 'tribe' and between 'tribes', can be seen as staving off the formation of an actual state, which requires wealth to come into being. It is the idea of the state that concerns Deleuze and Guattari, not the practical matter of its coming into being.[14]

DeLanda thus departs from Deleuze and Guattari in three crucial ways: first, he always proceeds from the concrete to the abstract, whereas Deleuze and Guattari (following Marx's famous reversal of Hegel) tend to proceed from the abstract to the concrete – the state is first of all an idea, it only subsequently functions as a structure of authority; second it seems he cannot countenance a purely immanent form of organisation that isn't somehow undergirded by the transcendent 'real', whereas Deleuze and Guattari say the exact opposite – the state can only function as it does to the extent that it can become immanent; and, third, he reverses the actual-virtual relation – he assumes that the concrete 'bits and pieces' are the actual, whereas for Deleuze and Guattari it is the structure of authority that is actual and the 'bits and pieces' that are virtual.[15] This last point will no doubt seem counter-intuitive, to put it mildly, but it is very clear in Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of the 'actual factor' in desiring-production that the actual is what is self-generated and therefore active in the unconscious, while the virtual is the imported and therefore inert or 'dead' element in the unconscious (for example, they describe the Oedipal complex as virtual).[16]

What then does Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage consist of? In brief, it is derived from a combination of Stoic language philosophy, Speech-Act theory and Hjelmslev's so-called Glossematics. In practice, the assemblage is the productive intersection of a form of content (actions, bodies, things) and a form of

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[13] G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. R. Hurley, M. Seem and H. R. Lane, London 1983, s. 217.

[14] For a more detailed account of this process see I. Buchanan, *Deleuze and Guattari's Anti-Oedipus*, London 2008, s. 88-116.

[15] For a more detailed account of this argument see I. Buchanan, *Deleuze and Ethics, „Deleuze Studies"*, vol. 5 2004, s. 17-18.

[16] G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, op. cit., s. 129.

expression (affects, words, ideas). The form of content and the form of expression are independent of each other – their relationship is one of reciprocal presupposition (one implies and demands the other but does not cause or refer to it, e.g. a sunset is an array of colours produced by the diffraction of light, but this does not cause us to see it as beautiful or melancholic; by the same token, our concepts of beauty and melancholy do not compel us to apprehend sunsets in this way). Let me illustrate this with a very brief example.

In 1923, George Mallory made headlines around the world when in response to the question 'Why do you want to climb Mount Everest?' he said 'because it's there'. People at the time, and still, were both dumbfounded and immediately comprehending of his seemingly blank statement, which appears to be uninterested in and not a little contemptuous of the actual physical features of the mountain, beyond its imperious height. They were dumbfounded because they expected him to say that it was the ultimate challenge or something that directly acknowledged the scale of the accomplishment were he to be able to pull it off; but they also immediately comprehended the fact that he didn't have to say anything like that because everyone already knew that it was a monumental challenge. One senses too that Mallory's insouciance is gesturing to something beyond the actual physical challenge of climbing Mount Everest to what we might call its virtual or symbolic dimension. By virtue of its size, Mount Everest's 'there-ness' in Mallory's sense consists in its capacity to confer upon anyone who scales it the attribute of having climbed the world's highest peak. Mallory knew that everyone knew that by being the first to scale the world's highest peak his body would acquire a new attribute – he would instantly become the first man to have climbed Mount Everest. That incorporeal transformation, as Deleuze and Guattari usefully call it, would stay with him for eternity. It is that aspect of its 'there-ness' that everyone instantly grasps. This is the form of the expression.

The physical effort required to climb Mount Everest is the price of admission to the symbolic realm of the select group of people who have conquered that peak. This amounts to saying actual effort is required to enter the virtual realm, which is also to say that events always occur on two planes at once –the empirical plane of consistency (the physical effort of climbing the actual mountain) and the abstract plane of immanence (the symbolic achievement of having climbed a symbolically significant mountain). Effort is the form of content. There is a feedback loop between these two forms. If the symbolic accolade (form of expression) is not great enough, then the effort (form of content) will seem out of proportion; by the same token, if the effort (form of content) required is not great enough, then the symbolic accolade (form of expression) will seem undeserved.

This can manifest itself in interesting ways. For example, apart from its height, Mount Everest is not regarded as the most difficult of the 14 above 8000m climbs – that honour usually goes to K2, which has a 1 in 4 fatality rate. If actual physical effort was the foundation of symbolic attainment, then K2 should rank above Mount Everest, but it doesn't except perhaps in the very

small community of 8000-ers. The prestige of climbing the world's highest peak remains so great that overcrowding on the climb is now more imperilling than the physical hazards of ice and rock. That prestige would evaporate, though, if one could simply take a helicopter to the peak, or ride some kind of funicular car to the top, making the journey as simple as getting to the airport or train station on time. So the effort required to get to the top isn't unimportant, by any means, but it always sits in a dialectical relationship with the symbolic dimension. The two planes must be adequate to each other. Anything that interrupts or interferes with this dialectical relationship between the forms (expression and content) is known as an assemblage converter.

In conclusion, then, however useful and analytically revealing assemblage theory can be, in practice its use of the concept of the assemblage is often indistinguishable from that of an adjective, serving more to name than frame a problem. Therefore, rather than opening a problem up it tends to close it down. Instead of a new understanding of the problem, it simply gives us a currently fashionable way of speaking about it. This issue becomes more urgent the widely assemblage theory is embraced. If everything is or must be an assemblage then the term loses precision, indeed it loses its analytic power altogether.

Assemblage Theory and Schizoanalysis

This article suggests considering Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the assemblage apart from its various appropriations by what has emerged as 'assemblage theory' that has, according to the author, generated its interesting but somehow diminished or reductive use. Looking at what might be perceived as errors in assemblage theory's understandings (in Actor Network Theory and Manuel DeLanda's appropriations in particular) it proposes a new set of rules for use of the concept that is more analytical and critically closer to Deleuze and Guattari's thought.

Teoria asamblażu a schizoanaliza

Autor artykułu proponuje rozważenie koncepcji asamblażu autorstwa Deleuze'a i Guattariego w izolacji od licznych wcześniejszych przykładów przywłaszczenia, które zdaniem autora jedynie podszywały się pod nią, w zamian skutkując interesującym, ale w jakimś przynajmniej stopniu umniejszającym czy też redukcyjnym użyciem. Spoglądając na to, co może zostać uznane za błędne w rozumieniu teorii asamblażu (w szczególności w teorii aktora-sieci czy w ujęciu Manuela DeLandy), autor proponuje powrót do oryginalnej myśli Deleuze'a i Guattariego, a w konsekwencji wysuwa propozycję nowego, bardziej analitycznego i krytycznego zestawu zasad omawianego pojęcia asamblażu.